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John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the noetic effects of sin

PAUL HELM
Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College, London, UK

Introduction

John Calvin's views on the *sensus divinitatis* have recently aroused considerable interest in philosophy in connection with the articulation of 'Reformed epistemology'. Part of that articulation has had to do with the critique of strong foundationalism; and what has been put in its place, and what is characteristic of 'Reformed' epistemology, is a version of weak foundationalism. For it has been argued that not only is strong foundationalism referentially incoherent, and weak founationalism permissible, but it has also been claimed that a person is within his epistemic rights to take the proposition 'God exists' as part of the foundations of his noetic structure, even though it is not self-evident, that is, evident to any rational person, that God exists. And even though one may be able to prove that God exists by using steps that are self-evident, from premises that are self-evident, one need not do this in order for one's belief in God to be rational. It is sufficient that that belief be part of an individual person's basic noetic structure.[1]

Precedent for this last claim, if not warrant for it, has been found in John Calvin. 'Reformed epistemology' takes encouragement from the fact that in Calvin one finds very little attention given to the proofs of God's existence in either the Thomist or the Enlightenment senses. There is little interest in developing a natural theology, and no requirement that a person ought to be able to prove that God exists, or to have that proof made by another on his behalf, in order for his belief in God's existence to be rational.

In fact Calvin shows little or no interest in the rationality of religious belief as such; he shows much more interest in establishing the fact that all men know God, or at least have the capacity for knowing God. One consequence of the doubt cast on strong foundationalism has been the encouragement of one kind or another of epistemological pluralism. This has led epistemologists to focus upon the rationality of belief rather than upon the foundations of knowledge. But Calvin's stress is not on the rationality of believing in God, nor on its non-rationality, but on the *knowledge* of God, on either the fact of

that knowledge, or the capacity for such knowledge. The reason for this stress will become clear in what follows.

Calvin's religious epistemology is grounded in what he refers to as the *sensus divinitatis*. In virtue of the fact that, according to him, we all possess this sense, God's existence does not have to be argued for in order for it to be known that God exists. Nor does any appeal need to be made to considerations of any general kind in order to establish that God is universally known. The most that is needed is for us to be reminded of certain matters of fact. Calvin's use of the term 'sense' signals that the knowledge of God is a common human endowment; mankind is created not only as capable of knowing God, but as actually knowing him. By the *sensus divinitatis* Calvin implicitly rejects the view that unbelief or agnosticism are the natural human conditions, or that it is rational to presume atheism, but implies that belief in God is natural in the sense of being part of man's original condition, part of what it means to be really or fully human.

The *sensus divinitatis* is central to Calvin's religious epistemology even though Calvin uses the term 'know' in a way that is richer than the merely epistemic. On the merely epistemic view, one may know that *p*, or know A, while at the same time viewing *p* or A with distaste or repugnance. But for Calvin, to know in the full sense is to be not only in the appropriate epistemic condition, but also in a positive affective and conative condition towards the one whom one knows.

> The knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God, but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety. (1960, p. 39)

The consequences of this view of what the knowledge of God comprises will also become apparent later.

The following exposition will involve us in a discussion in three phases. The first phase summarises Calvin's basic position on the *sensus*; the second phase goes into what Calvin thought the *sensus divinitatis* was in its pristine condition; while the third phase looks at what he takes to be the effects of sin upon the *sensus*. However we shall find it difficult to keep these two phases completely separate, as Calvin himself finds it difficult. Having looked at the two aspects of the *sensus*, unfallen and fallen, we shall then try to form a view about what Calvin means or may mean by the noetic effects of sin, the effects of sin upon the mind of man, including its effects upon this basic endowment.

So first to the main elements of Calvin's views on these two conditions of the *sensus divinitatis*, the pristine and the fallen, as they are found in the opening pages of the *Institutes*.

The sensus: the basic position

In the *Institutes* Calvin has this to say about the *sensus divinitatis*:

> There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will. If ignorance of God is to be looked for anywhere, surely one is most likely to find an example of it among the more backward folk and those more remote from civilization. Yet there is, as the eminent pagan says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. And they who in other aspects of life seem least to differ from brutes still continue to retain some seed of religion. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all. (1960, p. 44)

While Calvin is here ostensibly setting out the nature of the *sensus* in its unfallen condition, it is noticeable that he does not strictly separate the treatment of the *sensus* as unfallen from that as fallen; savage and barbarous nations, nations that are savage and barbarous because (presumably) they experience the effects of the fall, nonetheless give evidence of the universality of the *sensus*. One reason for not clearly separating the *sensus* fallen from the *sensus* unfallen is that there is a strong empirical element in Calvin's view; in effect he says that we can see now, by looking around, that the *sensus* is universally distributed and is therefore, in one important sense of the term 'natural', natural to mankind. There is also a kind of a *fortiori* argument present in Calvin at this point; if the *sensus* is universally distributed in the post-lapsarian present, then *a fortiori* it must have been originally natural.

This is one aspect of Calvin's teaching. The claim is that the sense of God is universal, and that it is capable of finding expression in a variety of theologies;

polytheism in religion, for example, is for Calvin evidence of the operation of the *sensus* (though of its malfunctioning) equally as much as monotheism. We shall return to this important point later. But Calvin also goes on, in the next Chapter of the *Institutes*, to claim that this knowledge of God is either smothered or corrupted.

> As experience shows, God has sown a seed of religion in all men. But scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it, once received, in his heart, and none in whom it ripens – much less shows fruit in season (cf. Ps. 1:3). Besides while some may evaporate in their own superstitions and others deliberately and wickedly desert God, yet all degenerate from the true knowledge of him. (1960, p. 47)

Calvin, of course, holds that we are all fallen, and remain fallen. He provides no place for epistemic perfectionism, any more than he does for moral perfectionism. So that each of us (even those who enjoy the knowledge of Christ the Redeemer) continue to have a warped or corrupted *sensus divinitatis*.

So the basic position is that all mankind have the *sensus* in virtue of their humanity, presumably in virtue of their being created in the image of God, and this *sensus* has not been eradicted by the fall, but it continues to function, or rather to malfunction, to the same universal extent.

Let us now consider each of these phases in the history of the *sensus* in more detail.

The *sensus divinitatis* in its original state

Several things are clear about the *sensus divinitatis* (SD) in its original form from the extracts given above, and several things are not so clear.

In the first place, by the knowledge of God which the SD conveys Calvin appears to mean two things, or we might say that the knowledge conveyed has two aspects. It is 'that by which we . . . conceive that there is a God' (1960, p. 39) and further, it is that by which we 'grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him' (1960, p. 39). That is, the knowledge of God given in the SD has both metaphysical-cognitive and moral-cognitive components which Calvin covers by the umbrella term 'knowledge'; the knowledge that the SD gives us of God leads us, or ought to lead us, to worship and serve him. Let us look at these two components in turn.

The metaphysical-cognitive component Calvin states briefly as 'that by which we . . conceive that there is a God'. The SD is 'an awareness of divinity' (1960, p. 43); by it men 'perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker' (1960, p. 44). These expressions confirm Calvin's lack of

interest in discursive proofs of God's existence as the basis for religious epistemology. There is a directness, an immediacy about the knowledge of God. But it is necessary to note something else that Calvin does not say in these expressions. He is not claiming that by virtue of the SD all men conceive of God; that is, he is not claiming that there is direct comprehension (or even apprehension) of God's essence. Indeed we know from what Calvin writes elsewhere about the incomprehensibility of God that he would be vehemently opposed to such an idea. For example,

> his essence is incomprehensible; hence his divineness far escapes all human perception. (1960, p. 52; see also *Institutes* I.III.I and I.XIII.I)

Much less is Calvin saying that all men have a direct experience of God. The sentences we are discussing do not amount to an appeal to religious experience either as a mystical 'encounter' or as some other kind of direct awareness of God. As far as I can see, the idea of an experience of God does not enter into any of the terminology that Calvin uses to characterise the SD.[2]

Rather by the SD all men conceive (or perceive) *that there is a God*; that is, there is recognition by all men of the fact that there is a God. This basic knowledge of God is propositional in content rather than a person to person awareness of God. And Calvin uses the terms 'conceive' and 'perceive' seemingly interchangeably in order to highlight that this knowledge is direct.

But granted that this knowledge is like perception, we may go on to ask, is it immediate, or is it the result of an inference? It seems to have two aspects. There is, in the first place, the *sensus*, a human faculty or disposition to interpret certain data in certain ways. It is this faculty that is innate, and Calvin says that whatever it is that this faculty grasps, it is able to be remembered by the one who grasps it, and to have that memory renewed by new daily experiences.

> God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. (1960, pp. 43–44)

This, what the *sensus* senses, is the second aspect. So the *sensus* is like a memory which is kept fresh by continual reminders of what has been remembered, or like a skill which is kept up by daily practice. A person may have the ability to ride a bicycle, but only so long as she keeps in practice. If she does not practice, then she loses the skill, though perhaps she retains the disposition to regain it. A person may have the disposition to identify and name trees, or birds, but the actual ability to identify is lost or worsened if it is not kept up. In a similar way, mankind in its original condition has the

innate disposition to conceive that God exists, a disposition which did not in any way jar with, but was confirmed by, daily experience.

So the *sensus* has two aspects; it is a dispositional ability, and a disposition which is promoted and exercised by the normal use of one's other faculties. Each of these aspects is necessary for the proper functioning of the *sensus*, and together they are sufficient. The faculty might exist without the external world the awareness of which daily renews it; but then there would be no knowledge of God because the faculty (considered as a disposition or set of dispositions) would never be activated or triggered by appropriate features of the environment discerned *a posteriori*. Likewise, without the faculty the data supplied by daily experience would be insufficient to convey knowledge of God.

The *sensus* is thus not immediate awareness, as the awareness of a physical sensation is immediate; rather it is a judgement of a highly unself-conscious and automatic kind, 'natural' in yet another sense of that term, based upon an experience of certain features of the physical world, upon its beauty and orderliness and other features. This judgement is accompanied by a feeling of obviousness or naturalness in the way in which it is natural for us to believe that there has been a past, or that there are minds other than our own minds, or that 2 + 2 = 4. One might even say that the judgement or awareness that there is a God supervenes upon experiences of the natural world in that whoever has a properly functioning *sensus* would, when brought to experience data of a certain kind, immediately, without the need for conscious ratiocination, form the belief that there is God, or have that belief sustained or reinforced.

There is a principle of universalisability at work, or in the background, here. If A has a properly working SD, and has the knowledge that there is a God renewed by data D1 . . . D5, then anyone else with a properly working SD, with the knowledge of data D1 . . . D5, would have the knowledge that there is a God renewed. So much, for the moment, for the metaphysical-cognitive aspect of the SD.

The moral-cognitive component of the *sensus* concerns the awareness of certain obligations arising out of the knowledge of the fact that God is the source of all goodness ('This I take to mean that not only does he sustain this universe (as he once founded it) by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment, bear with it in his mercy, watch over it by his protection' (1960, pp. 40–41)). This is corroborated by Calvin's later claim (1960, pp. 41–42) that the knowledge of God is sufficient to convey a sense of obligation.

What this means appears to be something like the following: that given a properly-working SD the natural awareness of the world around us, ourselves

included, activates or sustains the belief not simply that God exists, but that God has created and is sustaining all that one is aware of. So the cognitive content of the *sensus* is not merely that God exists, but that the Creator-God exists. This awareness, that oneself and all that one sees is the creation of God, in turn triggers beliefs and feelings of awe, respect, gratitude and obligation to the benefactor of the whole, beliefs and feelings which are entirely appropriate given the knowledge of the Creator that men possess, and commitment to the moral principle: *Benefactors ought to be loved and obeyed*.

That is, a component part of the SD is a moral faculty capable of reasoning as follows: I ought to love and obey whoever has created and sustains me; I am naturally aware that God sustains me; therefore, I ought to love and obey God. But although the moral faculty must be capable of reasoning in this fashion, it need not actually reason like this; the moral judgement that God is to be loved and obeyed may be automatically formed. And because, in the unfallen state, there was no weakness of will or failure of any other kind, then those who reasoned in this fashion did love and obey God, did 'consecrate their lives to his will' (1960, p. 44). Using Immanuel Kant's terminology we might say that each person with a properly-working SD in a properly-working environment has a 'holy will', a will that recognises moral obligations to serve and obey God, and which willingly meets these obligations, but does not recognise them *as* obligations.

Calvin also sharply distinguishes this knowledge of God our Creator from the knowledge of God the Redeemer through Christ (1960, p. 40) ('It is one thing to feel that God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings – and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ' (1960, p. 40)). Despite the earlier reservations we expressed as to Calvin's enthusiasm (or rather, lack of enthusiasm) for proofs of God's existence, Calvin may thus quite properly be said to have a natural theology, so long as one bears in mind the diverse meanings of that expression. His natural theology is not one that is based upon discursive proofs, but upon innate, properly functioning capacities common (i.e., natural) to all people, which when brought to bear on the common world of sense experience, the natural world, yield a grasp that there is one God and creator of this entire world who is to be worshipped and served.

Because of this emphasis upon the natural knowledge of God, Calvin would be strongly averse to the thought, therefore, that the only knowledge of God that people have, or may have, is the knowledge of God's redeeming grace in Christ. While not giving much support to the reliance of a theologian such as Aquinas on natural theology, Calvin would nonetheless have agreed with the mediaeval and scholastic emphasis that redemptive grace builds upon nature

(the effects of the innate, universally distributed *sensus*). It does not subvert it, though it does renew it. However, this is to anticipate an aspect of our later discussion of Calvin's view of the *sensus* as fallen.

So the SD is a universal phenomenon. And one important point that arises from Calvin's reference to this awareness that there is God as a *sense* is precisely to draw attention to its universal, 'natural' character. The SD is not of course a sense in the way in which the five senses are. But as the five senses are universal human capacities to discriminate sounds and tastes and so forth which arise in our environment, and are the proper endowment of any normal human being, so the SD is a universal (and original) capacity, distinct from the five senses but not wholly unrelated to their operation, as we have seen. Thus it is a natural capacity, a capacity to know that there is a God, a capacity which is activated or actualised when proper attention is given to the world that we inhabit as, in an unfallen world, it invariably would be.

So it is not accurate to say that Calvin's account of the SD is of an innate idea of God. He is not committed to the position that all men and women are born with a fully-formed concept of God. Had he known of John Locke's critique of innate ideas, including the innate idea of God, Calvin could or would have concurred.

Locke famously believed that the idea of God has the best chance of all ideas of being innate, but argued that the evidence for its innateness, as for that of all ideas, is consistent with and better explained by the non-innateness hypothesis. If the universality of the idea of God proves its innateness, then the universality of the idea of fire may as well prove its innateness. Furthermore,

> I grant that *if* there were any ideas to be found imprinted on the minds of men, we have reason to expect *it should be the notion of his maker*, as a mark GOD set on his own workmanship, to mind man of his dependence and duty; and that herein should appear the first instances of human knowledge. But how late is it before any such notion is discoverable in children? And when we find it there, how much more does it resemble the opinion and notion of the teacher than represent the true God? (1964, I.IV.13)

Further,

> Can it be thought that the *ideas* men have of God are the characters and marks of himself, engraven in their minds by his own finger, when we see that, in the same country, under one and the same name, *men have far different*, nay often *contrary and inconsistent ideas* and concepts *of him*. Their agreeing in a name, or sound, will scarce prove an innate notion of him. (1964, I.IV.14)

Hence, on the grounds of explanatory simplicity, the non-innateness hypothesis ought to be preferred. It accounts better than does the innateness hypothesis for the fact that people have a similar conception of God to their teachers, and different conceptions of God, where they occur, disprove the innateness hypothesis. The most that appeal to innateness might prove, according to Locke, is an innate idea of the name of God.

Calvin, no more than Locke, claims that we each have an innate idea of God, nor even an innate idea of some god or other. Rather, as we have seen, according to Calvin the SD is an innate endowment triggered by factors which are not innate, namely the features of the external world. It would have come as no surprise to him to be told that where two people occupy different environments, for example where they have teachers with different ideas of God, then the ideas of God which they form will also be different. Were Calvin to have addressed the counterfactual question, 'What would the original condition of mankind have been had mankind not been placed in the environment they were in fact placed in but in some chaotic environment?' consistently with his position he ought to have said; the SD would have not been fully or properly activated, and despite possessing the pristine *sensus*, such people would not have had the knowledge of God.

How does Calvin arrive at conclusions similar to those of Locke? Calvin claims that the knowledge that he, John Calvin (together with, he believes, his readers), has that all men and women have the SD is *a posteriori* in character: 'as experience shows, God has sown a seed of religion in all men' (1960, p. 47). He does not say that the knowledge that all people are endowed with the SD is known through reason, nor (for all his emphasis upon the supreme authority of the Bible) through the Scriptures, but through daily experience. It is how people behave that, so to speak, gives them away, and it is our knowledge of this behaviour in ourselves and in others that makes the universal possession of the SD evident.

Being an empirical claim, the claim that all people possess a SD is presumably in principle open to empirical refutation. But what would, count as an actual refutation of it? It is hard to say. As we have already seen, because Calvin believes that the SD, though possessed by everyone, is perverted in everyone by sin (a factor that we shall come to discuss in some detail later on), he is not surprised by the existence of what he regards as false belief, idolatry and such like, among the 'barbarous' nations. So the fact that there are polytheists, or animists, or dry as dust deists, does not for Calvin refute his claim as to the universality of SD; rather it confirms that claim, for such religious beliefs and expressions of belief are evidence of the perversion of the SD in human beings; and it is impossible to pervert what does not exist.

What would refute his claim about the universal distribution of the *sensus* would be the existence of a person who gave no glimmer of concern, at any point in her life, whether or not God exists, or whether or not she has a conscience. Calvin is not saying that the belief and behaviour that he draws attention to is conclusive evidence that God exists, but it is evidence for the conclusion that the sense of God is universal. It is worth dwelling on this distinction for a moment or two.

It is well-known that Calvin refers to the views of Cicero in articulating his view of the SD, and also that Cicero's *The Nature of Gods* is one of the main ancient sources for what is known as the Argument from Universal Consent for the existence of God. 'The crux of the matter is known to all men everywhere. From their birth it is inscribed upon their minds that gods exist' (1972, p. 128). Similar words are found in Seneca's *Epistulae Moralis*.

> We are accustomed to attach great importance to the universal belief of mankind. It is accepted by us as a convincing argument. That there are gods we infer from the sentiment engrafted in the human mind; nor has any nation ever been found, so far beyond the pale of law and civilization as to deny their existence. (1967, p. 117)

Are we then to conclude that Calvin subscribes to a version of the argument from consent, and that the appeal to the SD is such an argument?

Despite the allusions to Cicero, this would be a rather hasty conclusion to draw, I believe. In fact there is reason to think that Calvin subscribes to what one might call an inverted form of the argument from consent. For he writes the *Institutes* as a Christian man and theologian. For him (and, he trusts, for his readers) it is a fundamental fact that God exists, for this is known through his own experience and is affirmed by Scripture. One gains the impression reading the *Institutes* that Calvin would not have been greatly ruffled in his faith were, say, out-and-out atheism to be widespread (I shall make a further comment on atheism later). But in that case why does he insist upon the fact of the universal *sensus divinitatis*?

The widespread, near universal belief in God or the gods is offered by Calvin as empirical support for the thesis that God is known to all men, a proposition which he believes is taught in the Bible. It is not that Calvin argues (in the manner of the argument from universal consent) that there is widespread or universal belief that God exists, therefore God exists, but the opposite. Given that he, John Calvin, knows that God exists, experience confirms that this knowledge is universal, though universally corrupted. Calvin appeals to Cicero, it is true, but he turns Cicero's argument from consent upside down; he uses it not to establish that God exists *ab initio*, but to provide confirmatory

evidence for what he already knows. We shall shortly discuss his reason for doing so.

There is one other matter that calls for general comment. What exactly is 'the divine' that all men have a sense of? What is the sense and reference of this term? Calvin is clearly not saying that all those who have a sense of God have a sense of the same God. Those whose sense of God finds expression in polytheism, for example, have a different and incompatible sense of God or the gods from those whose sense of God finds expression in monotheism. But do all who give different senses to 'God' or 'the gods' in fact refer to the same God? It is not plausible to suppose that Calvin is offering some early version of John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*, believing that though the senses which different religionists attach to 'the divine' are different, all these senses have a common referent.

It is more accurate, I believe, to suppose that for Calvin the divine of which all men have a sense is more like the recognition of a category of things than something or things within a category. What Calvin is therefore saying, I suggest, is something like this; that all men have an awareness of something or things that performs a unique categorial function; just as 'material object' plays a unique categorial function, that of referring to a class of three-dimensional physical objects existing in space and time, though different people have conflicting beliefs about what material objects there are, and 'joke' plays a unique categorial function, though people differ about what is funny, so 'the divine' plays such a function, though different people have conflicting beliefs about the character of the divine, about what God or gods there are. Some are monotheists, some are polytheists, some are animists, and so on; some believe that the fact of the existence of a God or gods places certain obligations on us, others who believe in God believe that they have other obligations, or perhaps no obligations at all. The functioning of the SD consists in the awareness of the categorial function performed by 'the divine', something like 'object of worship', or 'that from whom all things have come', together with a disposition to believe in, revere and obey whatever is judged to perform this function.

The perverted *sensus divinitatis*

Let us now turn our attention to the other side of the coin, to Calvin's belief that the human race is fallen, and its consequences for the SD. We have already touched on this in discussing Calvin's treatment of the unfallen SD, and this is not surprising, for so impressed is Calvin by the lapsed character of the SD that he refers to this, as it is expressed, for example, in the idolatry of the 'barbarous' even when ostensibly discussing the SD in its pristine

condition. But it is interesting that for all his stress on the dramatic and deep effects of the fall, Calvin does not say that the fall has completely eradicated the *sensus*.

Nor does Calvin entertain what one might call a doctrine of suppression. There is no evidence that he thinks that all men and women have a sense of the true God in their religious subconscious which they then suppress or transmute into an animistic or polytheistic variant of that. Calvin does not employ the idea of levels of consciousness, and say that although men and women may profess to be polytheists, or animists, deep down they are monotheists of the sort that Calvin himself was. He is not saying that polytheism is a mere surface expression of belief, an attempt to escape what deep in their hearts polytheists know to be true, that there is one God. Nor, even, does Calvin explain the diversity of religious belief and practice by invoking something akin to the idea of false consciousness as employed by Marx and the Marxists to explain religious belief. He may be committed to something akin to a doctrine of false consciousness, but if so it does not work successfully to eradicate belief in God in those that are under its way.

However, there is *some* similarity between the approach of writers such as Marx and Freud, and Calvin. To see this, let us briefly consider Calvin's error theory. What is error about God due to? According to Calvin it is not due, basically, to a lack of information. Error is not due to ignorance. Nor is it due to mere weakness. Nor is it due to the influence of the environment; nor to a combination of these factors. In fact, it is surprsing that Calvin seems to pay little or no attention to the fact that the environment now bears the marks of the fall, and might be expected to affect the triggering of the *sensus*, and in Chapter V of Book I of the I *Institutes* he stresses that the natural world continues to provide clear and inexcusable evidence that it is the creation of God, for 'men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him' (1960, p. 52).

Rather, error is due to perversity or wilfulness of the human self, a perversity that is often, but not always, or necessarily accompanied by, and made possible by, self-deception. Because the issue of God's existence is of considerable importance for men and women, that is, it is not a mere theoretical or trivial issue, sin leads, via a mechanism of self-deceiving wilfulness, to the true God being displaced from within the category of the divine by many gods, or by no god; or else there is a mere theoretical acceptance of the reality of the true God.

It may be plausible to construe the varieties of religious belief as perversions of the one true belief which all people are disposed to hold if they are true to their nature as human beings. Such diverse religious beliefs would thus provide both strong empirical confirmation of Calvin's thesis as well as

evidence that the original endowment had been perverted. But what would Calvin say of out and out atheism? Would not such atheism provide empirical refutation of his claim about the universality of the *sensus*?

Calvin does in fact consider such atheism, in the following terms:

> If, indeed, there were some in the past, and today not a few appear, who deny that God exists, yet willy-nilly they from time to time feel an inkling of what they desire not to believe. One reads of no one who burst forth into bolder or more unbridled contempt of deity than Gaius Caligula; yet no one trembled more miserably when any sign of God's wrath manifested itself; thus – albeit unwillingly – he shuddered at the God whom he professedly sought to despise. (1960, p. 45)

Calvin seems to be saying the following; that the fact that atheists may occasionally feel the pull of theism, or of some other religious belief which entails theism, is evidence of the SD. More particularly the evidence of the SD is seen, in the case of those who are atheists, in the moral rather than the metaphysical aspect of the SD. For Calvin goes on

> they seek out every subterfuge to hide themselves from the Lord's presence, and to efface it again from their minds. But in spite of themselves they are always entrapped. Although it may sometimes seem to vanish for a moment, it returns at once and rushes in with new force. If for these there is any respite from anxiety of conscience, it is not much different from the sleep of drunken or frenzied persons, who do not rest peacefully even while sleeping because they are continually troubled with dire and dreadful dreams. The impious themselves therefore exemplify the fact that some conception of God is ever alive in all men's minds. (1960, p. 45)

That it is chiefly the moral rather than the metaphysical aspect of the *sensus* that remains in evidence in the case of the avowed atheist is borne out by these further remarks:

> Although Diagorous and his like may jest at whatever has been believed in every age concerning religion, and Dionysius may mock the heavenly judgment, this is sardonic laughter, for the work of conscience, sharper than any cauterizing iron, gnaws away within. (1960, p. 46)

That is, however men may attempt to harden their hearts, they cannot eradicate or smother the voice of conscience. Where the existence of God is explicitly denied, that influence may still make itself felt in the production of certain kinds of moral awareness.

The noetic effects of sin

So perhaps, despite what was said earlier, it is helpful to think of the SD as operating at different levels, or at least in different ways in different people. In some it operates epistemically and evidentially, in the recognition they give to the existence of God or the gods; while in others it operates morally, via their conscience, as they recognise, however fitfully, that they have obligations which they fail to keep and are, despite themselves, troubled by such failure.

Can we get closer to understanding what mechanisms are involved in what Calvin sees as the intellectual degeneration that has taken place in our knowledge of God as a result of the fall? Perhaps we can, in the following way. We have already noted that according to Calvin the original SD has both a metaphysical and a moral component. As Calvin understands the original creation, it is something which bears the marks of the goodness of the creator. The creation is not only the result of God's power, but of his character as the supreme benefactor. God is good, and his creation is good. And mankind, chief among the products of God's creation, is also created good.

The fall is a moral rupture between the Creator and mankind with (among other things) noetic consequences. These consequences are not such that, being fallen, a person is unable to count, or to reason, though perhaps human abilities to do these things are reduced. Perhaps in an unfallen human being the capacity to do mental arithmetic or formal logic is indescribably greater than anyone's at present. Perhaps after the fall even the best formal logicians fall below a threshold which the worst unfallen formal logician could attain to. Such speculation is not ruled out by anything that Calvin says. Nevertheless, the way in which the lapse has ruptured the relationship with God such that this has noetic consequences might be something like the following.

It is a well-known fact that different conceptions of self-interest lead to diffrent interpretations of the facts, and even to a denial of acts. Through such misconceptions we misinterpret evidence, hide from evidence, are a prey to imagination, accept common opinion, and the like. In a similar way, Calvin would argue that the fall has brought about misguided conceptions of self-interest. A person does not now see his self-interest bound up with the knowledge and service of God, but in other ways. And as a result of this, he misinterprets relevant evidence, he suppresses evidence, he accepts common opinion, and so on (William Wainwright, 1994).

So Calvin would wish to distinguish the evidence that there is a God from the conditions for its true recognition. Nothing that has been said about the ways in which, according to Calvin, the SD is perverted, ought to be taken as suggesting that Calvin was a subjectivist or relativist about matters of fact. The facts of the creation are what they are, in virtue of the one creative act of God. But he would also emphasise a kind of correlation between such

objective facts and the character and powers of the cognisers of those facts. Knowledge or true understanding of the facts is thus a function not only of what the facts are, but also of the nature of those who are apprehenders or would-be apprehenders of the facts.

The fact that human beings cannot hear sounds beyond a certain frequency range, but bats can, is a fact about one limitation of human nature. The nature of human nature conditions the sort of world we shall perceive. There are sounds created in the world such that they cannot be heard by normal human beings. A bat occupies a very different sensory environment than a human being. In a similar way, Calvin would say, there is evidence to be gained from the world, evidence which reinforces and sustains the belief that there is a God, in those who are properly equipped to receive it. This equipment does not consist in the existence of a sixth sense, nor of one of the five sense suitably augmented, nor even of a moral sense of the Hutchesonian kind (a sense which intuits non-natural values), but of a set of moral and emotional preconditions for evaluating evidence, including moral evidence, correctly (see Merold Westphal, 1990).

Here I am reading Calvin as an evidentialist;[3] he is not, as I understand him, like William James, claiming that our moral and passional nature is such that in certain circumstances we are justified in believing what there is insufficient evidence for. But appreciating the evidence is a function not merely of the senses, or the reason, or of some combination of these, but also – since the universe has a moral character – of the cognizer's moral character as well.

The fallen investigator, according to Calvin on this interpretation, has certain wants and interests; in an unfallen condition, these wants and interests are natural in the sense that they are part of the original God-imparted endowment. So it is in terms of these interests that the strength of the evidence for God's existence is assessed. (Calvin would, I think, have had no truck with the idea that there is an intrinsic ambiguity in the evidence such that in principle the same event might be 'seen as' the hand of God, or 'seen as' the product of purely naturalistic forces. He would not possess the anxiety of many modern religious epistemologists to preserve human indeterministic freedom by invoking 'epistemic distance'. For Calvin, epistemic distance, where it exists, is a loss, not a gain.)

Behind this is a view of human nature rather different from that to which we have become accustomed since the Enlightenment. Human nature is not to be understood exclusively in ratiocinative and sensory-evidential powers, with human values being a relegated to 'the passions', but it also includes moral and affective powers as well. It does not follow that impartiality is the sole or even the chief intellectual virtue, though things very like it, the virtue of reconsidering one's position, paying attention to criticism, revising

one's belief in the light of new information, are among the virtues. The point is, however, what is a relevant criticism, or what counts are relevant new information?

As Merold Westphal puts it (1990, p. 213) according to John Calvin none of us comes naturally to a proper knowledge of God (though many come naturally to some knowledge of God, and all are naturally disposed to gain such knowledge).

Calvin and 'Reformed epistemology'

I suggest that in his remarks about the SD Calvin is not providing us with the materials for constructing an alternative epistemology to strong foundationalism. His message is not that strong foundationalism is wrong, or not merely that. It is more radical than that: that the noetic effects of sin are universal and ineradicable; the recommended remedy is not the development of an alternative epistemology, but the knowledge of God the Redeemer.

This discussion of the SD took as its starting point the anti strong foundationalist turn in modern epistemology, some of which finds precedent and warrant in Calvin's views on the SD. Such philosophers see Calvin's disinterest in natural theology as a repudiation of the strong foundationalism of the Enlightenment and as a form of weak foundationalism. Calvin is the case of a Christian thinker who does not scruple to place the proposition that God exists (and many similar theistic propositions) in the foundations of his noetic structure, and to affirm that all men, despite their fallenness, ought to place them there as well. For someone who, following Calvin's example, adopts this 'Reformed epistemology', natural theology is not necessary for the rationality of religious belief, though it may be sufficient for it.

But is Calvin in fact a foundationalist in any sense? In 'Reason and Belief in God' Alvin Plantinga cites passages from the *Institutes* regarding the SD, including this one

> Lest anyone, then be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe as a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. (1983, p. 66)

And then draws the following conclusion

> Calvin's claim is that one who accedes to this tendency and in these circumstances accepts the belief that God has created the world – perhaps upon beholding the starry heavens, or the splendid majesty of the moun-

> tains, or the intricate, highly articulate beauty of a tiny flower – is entirely within his epistemic rights in doing so. It is not that such a person is justified or rational in so believing by virtue of having an implicit argument – some version of the teleological argument, say. No; he does not need any argument for justification or rationality. His belief need not be based on any other propositions at all; under these conditions he is perfectly rational in accepting belief in God in the utter absence of any argument, deductive or inductive. Indeed, a person in these conditions, says Calvin, *knows* that God exists. (Plantinga, 1983, p. 67)

Merold Westphal claims that Plantinga's appeal to Calvin as one who has anticipated the foundationalist-evidentialist objection to theistic belief and given the outlines of an alternative account of religious knowledge is right as far as it goes, but that it does not go far enough (1990, p. 212). I want to suggest that even this may be too excessive a claim.

Perhaps Plantinga's comments amount to this, that Calvin offers what is an enthymemetic argument from the premise that there are people who without argument have the belief that God exists, to the conclusion that they are entitled to such a belief. The suppressed premise is something like:

(S) It is rational to believe in God's existence without argument.

But is this a reasonable conclusion to draw from Calvin? There is reason to think that it is not. For one thing, there is no evidence from the passages cited (or from any similar passages) that Calvin has in mind the rationality of religious belief.

Later on Plantinga quotes remarks of Calvin about the fact that the authority of Scripture is based not on 'rational proofs' but the conviction that the Bible is the word of God ought to rest 'in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit' (1983, p. 67).

There is a kind of parallel here between Calvin's remarks and the denial of strong foundationalism; according to Calvin in the case of the knowledge of God men do not have reasons, while in the case of the authority of Scripture men do not *need* reasons; at least, no reasons that are to be found only outside the Bible. But there is a significant lack of parallel also, for in discussing the authority of the Bible Calvin is making a normative claim, a claim about where we ought to ground our conviction that the Bible is the word of God. But it is not at all clear that these remarks about the self-authenticating character of the Bible apply, in Calvin's mind, to belief in God's existence.

For what we have found in Calvin, I suggest, is little or no interest in the rationality of religious belief. (Rationality in this sense is perhaps as much a child of the Enlightenment as is strong foundationalism; certainly one

struggles to find any interest in such an issue in Calvin.) Rather, what Calvin emphasises is not rationality but responsibility. His interest in knowledge is not an interest in the rational grounds for theistic belief, but in establishing that since all men and women in fact have some knowledge of God, they are culpable when they do not form their lives in a way that is appropriate to such knowledge.

> For how can the thought of God penetrate your mind without your realizing immediately that, since you are his handiwork, you have been made over and bound to his command by right of creation, that you owe your life to him? – that whatever you undertake, whatever you do, ought to be ascribed to him? (1960, p. 42)
>
> Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will. (1960, p. 44)

Can what Calvin says be used for other purposes? Could one argue that the fact of the universality of the seed of religion proves the rationality of religious belief, or renders it unnecessary? Can one rationally reconstruct Calvin to yield the distinctive tenets of 'Reformed epistemology?'

Perhaps one can. Perhaps what Plantinga has in mind in appealing to Calvin is an argument that is something like the following:

1. The original epistemic condition of mankind was such that every human belief held then was fully rationally justified.
2. Originally, mankind believed in God without needing any reasons for doing so.
3. Whatever presently remains of the original epistemic condition is rational.
4. For any present belief, if that belief is identical with a belief that was part of the original human condition, then that belief is rational.
5. Some people presently believe in God without having any reasons for doing so.
6. Therefore, those who presently believe in God without reasons for doing so are rational.

This seems to me to be much more plausible an account of the argument implicit in passages from Calvin like those cited. However, there is still an emphasis upon issues of rationality that is not present in Calvin. For in asserting the universality of the SD Calvin is making a broad factual claim, that as a matter of fact everyone has in them the seed of religion. And, following St Paul in Romans I, he is more concerned with using this fact about knowledge to establish the responsibility of all people in the sight of

God for the use to which they put this knowledge than he is about saying anything about rationality. The point about foundationalism, whether weak or strong, is as Plantinga says, a point about epistemic entitlement; but Calvin says nothing about this, and he may imply nothing about it either.

Another attempt to harnessing Calvin to 'Reformed epistemology' might be made by using the approach of another such epistemologist, Nicholas Wolterstorff. Wolterstorff distinguishes between ineluctable beliefs, propositions we could not have refrained from believing, and eluctable beliefs, which we could have refrained from believing (1983, p. 162). In the case of propositions ineluctably believed we are rational in continuing to hold such a belief in the absence of an adequate reason to cease from believing it. Ineluctable believing is innocent until it is proved guilty. And so, Wolterstorff claims, someone who comes to belief in God immediately, without reasons, might nonetheless be justified in having and holding such a belief (1983, p. 176). Wolterstorff does not offer this as a gloss on Calvin, but could it be taken to be such? It is hard to see how. For one thing, Calvin seems to think of the belief in God or the gods that all people have as, if anything, an ineluctable belief. Though even this is straining things, for Calvin does not seem to pay much attention to the question of whether someone who, as the result of the working of the SD, believes in God or the gods, could have refrained from so believing.

If all men and women believed in God, then there would (in one sense) be no need to establish the existence of God rationally, but (in another sense) this universality would not settle anything. But in any case Calvin does not say that all men believe in God; he says that all men have the seed of religion, the disposition to believe in God.

Perhaps another attempt could be made in the following way:

1. All men and women ought to believe in the true God.
2. I find myself believing in the true God without having any reasons to do so.
3. Whatever a person finds himself believing he should continue to believe unless there is good reason to desist.
4. Therefore, I ought to continue to believe in God.

(4) is a rather stronger conclusion than Reformed epistemology needs; but from (3) we can infer:

5. Therefore, I may continue to believe in him.

This conclusion, that a person may believe in God without having any reasons for doing so, is characteristic of Reformed epistemology, and follows on the assumption that if A ought to do X then A is permitted to do X. The problem

with this argument, if it is to be used to establish Reformed epistemology, is (1). (1) is certainly a proposition about the ethics of belief that Calvin appears to hold to. And perhaps Calvin believes that he does not need reasons for believing in the truth of (1); perhaps (1) expresses a kind of weak moral foundationalism. But perhaps not; for as we have seen Calvin certainly offers reasons why men and women do believe in God, reasons deriving from the SD and the environment in which it functions.

I suggest that those who look to Calvin as the *fons et origo* of Reformed epistemology are in something of a dilemma at this point. If they appeal to him to provide a premise of a factual kind about the seed of religion working in all people, then they will certainly find evidence for this in Calvin, as we have seen. But it does not follow from Calvin's remarks about the seed of religion that a person is entitled to believe in God reasonlessly, nor does Calvin say that it does. He does not say that it does, nor does he deny that it does. If on the other hand they appeal to a normative proposition as a premise, a proposition about what men and women ought to believe, which they might find warrant for in Calvin's remarks about the responsibility of all men and women before God, it is surely implausible to suppose that such a proposition is acceptable without reason.

The problem with appealing to Calvin is that his remarks about the SD are first-order observations. He does not theorise about what he takes to be matters of fact; and where he does theorise, as in his brief remarks about the grounds for accepting the authority of Scripture, these remarks do not seem to be directly applicable to questions about the rationality of belief in God.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. The more recent 'externalist' turn in Plantinga's epistemology, and the appeal he there makes to Calvin, falls outside the scope of this article. I have discussed it briefly in *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
2. This interpretation contrasts with that of Dewey Hoitenga (1991, p. 150) who interprets the immediacy as parallel to the direct sensory acquaintance with physical objects.
3. For another discussion of Calvin in relation to 'Reformed epistemology' this time interpreting him as a fideist, see John Beversluis (1995).

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Address for correspondence: Professor Paul Helm, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of London, King's College, London WC2R 2LS, UK
Phone: +44 71 873-2623; Fax: +44 71 873-2255; E-mail: paul.helm@kcl.ac.uk